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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
Monterey, California

THESIS

SECURITY OR POLITICS: THE RETURN OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

by

Stacy D. Kaucher

December 2001

Thesis Advisor: Glenn E. Robinson
Second Reader: Anna Simons

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The aim of this thesis is to analyze the role that domestic politics plays in the decision making process of the leaders of Israel and Syria with regard to returning the Golan Heights.

Many argue that the core issue of returning the Golan is purely military, relating to the security buffer the occupied territory provides to Israel's northern settlements. While holding the high ground is still a key military tenet when evaluating terrain, Israel's security rationale for keeping the Golan Heights holds little credibility, as demonstrated by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's readiness to turn over all but 200 meters of the Golan to Syria during the last round of serious negations between both countries.

I argue that for each side the return of the Golan Heights is not a bilateral security issue between Israel and Syria but is instead an internal domestic matter. The return of the Golan depends on a political decision-making process within each country more than it does on military concerns.

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SECURITY OR POLITICS: THE RETURN OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS

from the

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the role that domestic politics plays in the decision making process of the leaders of Israel and Syria with regard to returning the Golan Heights.

Many argue that the core issue of the Golan is purely military, relating to the security buffer that the occupied territory provides to Israel's northern settlements. While holding the high ground is still a key military tenet when evaluating terrain, Israel's security rationale for keeping the Golan Heights has little credibility, as demonstrated by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's readiness to turn over all but 200 meters of the Golan to Syria during the last round of serious negations between both countries.

I argue that the return of the Golan Heights is not a bilateral security issue between Israel and Syria but is instead an internal domestic matter. The return of the Golan depends on domestic politics within each country more than it does on military concerns.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION....1
A. WHAT IS THE GOLAN....1
B. CAPTURING THE GOLAN....1
C. ANNEXATION....2
D. DILEMMAS FACING ISRAEL....3
E. DILEMMAS FACING SYRIA....3
F. THESIS....4

II. SECURITY ISSUES IMPACTING GOLAN NEGOTIATIONS....5
A. MILITARY: STRATEGIC TERRAIN....5
B. SETTLEMENTS....7
C. WATER....11

III. THE GOLAN IN ISRAELI DOMESTIC POLITICS....15
A. CHALLENGES....15
B. DOMESTIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A HARDLINE APPROACH....16
C. DOMESTIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A SOFTLINE APPROACH....21
D. CONCLUSION....29

IV. THE GOLAN IN SYRIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS....33
A. CHALLENGES....33
B. DOMESTIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A HARDLINE APPROACH....35
C. DOMESTIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A SOFTLINE APPROACH....38
D. CONCLUSION....41

V. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS....45

LIST OF REFERENCES....49

INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST....53

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many argue that that the principle reason Israel holds on to the Golan Heights is purely military, relating to the indispensable strategic buffer zone, early warning and surveillance capacity, and the advantageous position the Golan provides for launching an offensive against Syria. This latter capability also provides a good measure of deterrence.

While holding the high ground is still a key military tenet when evaluating terrain, Israel's security rationale for keeping the Golan can be questioned, as evidenced by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's readiness to turn over all but 200 meters of the Golan Heights to Syria, during the last round of negotiations between both countries.

With the death of President Hafez al-Asad in 2000, his successor and son, Bashar, faces the same challenges and internal opposition when negotiating with Israel about the return of the Golan. Current analysis of the new Syrian President after his first year in office reveals that he is still developing his power base, and some would argue fighting for his survival. Thus any shift from his father's policy regarding the full return of the Golan Heights would be political suicide.[1]

[1] Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy. *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East*. Brookings Institute Press. Washington D.C. 1997: 93.

In this thesis I argue that the Israeli myth of keeping the Golan purely for security reasons can be shattered. While the return of the Golan Heights does create new security concerns for the state of Israel, these challenges can be overcome. What propels the return of the Golan is not purely a bilateral security issue between Israel and Syria, but is instead an internal domestic matter which drives the political decision-making process in each country. Furthermore, an analysis will be made comparing the internal politics involved in a hardline versus a softline approach, and the domestic costs and benefits of each tactic to resolve the issue of returning the Golan Heights.

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For their assistance in the preparation of this thesis, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Doctor Glenn E. Robinson and Doctor Anna Simons.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. WHAT IS THE GOLAN

The Golan Heights is a mountainous plateau rising steeply from the Jordan River valley along Israel's northeast border. It covers approximately 780 square miles. The average altitude of the heights is 3,200 feet, with Mount Hermon in the north rising to an elevation of 7,296 feet. The location and elevation of the Golan Heights makes it a key geostrategic piece of terrain in the Middle East. Since their capture of the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 War, the Israelis have occupied, annexed and established settlements on it. There is no greater point of contention between Israel and Syria today than the full withdrawal and complete return of the Golan Heights.

B. CAPTURING THE GOLAN

During the 1967 War, Israel acquired the Golan Heights after two days (9-10 June) of some of the fiercest armor and infantry assaults of the war. By seizing the Golan the Israelis negated the threat of a possible Syrian attack against northern Galilee. Israeli artillery and armor now commanded the high ground and look down on Damascus.

Given its capture of the Golan Heights the Israeli government widely believed that if it played its cards correctly, it could use the Golan to pave the way for peace negotiations with Syria[2]. On June 19, 1967, the Israeli Cabinet unanimously voted to return the whole of the Golan Heights to Syria in return for peace and demilitarization.[3]

[2] Chaim Herzog. *The Arab Israeli Wars.* Vantage Books, Random House. New York, 1984: 189.

[3] Ibid: 190.

At the Arab Summit Conference at Khartoum on 1 September 1967, the Arab leaders passed the "four no's" resolution – no talks before withdrawal [from the Golan], no direct negotiations with Israel, no partial solutions over the Golan, no recognition and formal peace with Israel.[4] Thus, the ground was prepared for a further renewal of hostilities. During the 1973 War, Syria briefly recaptured a portion of the Golan Heights, but Israel quickly regained its lost terrain and captured additional Syrian territory. In 1974, the "Israeli-Syrian Disengagement of Forces Agreement" was signed.[5] Both Israel and Syria recognized that the disengagement of forces was the first step towards a just and durable peace based on UN Resolutions 242 and 338.[6] President Hafez al-Asad also made verbal commitments not to allow guerrilla raids from the Syrian side of the disengagement line.[7] Because of this agreement, there has been no major conflict on the Golan since 1973.

C. ANNEXATION

On December 14, 1981, Israel passed legislation to bring the Golan Heights under Israeli civil law, jurisdiction and administration.[8] The United States criticized the Israeli action and the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 497, declaring the Israeli action "null and void and without international legal; effect."[9]

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[4] Ibid: 191.

[5] Muhammad Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready." *Foreign Policy*, No.96, Fall 1994: 145.

[6] UNR 242 calls for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from all occupied territories and the recognition of the Israeli state. UNR 338 proclaims that the Golan is sovereign territory of Syria.

[7] Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready:" 146.

[8] Aryeh Shalev. *Israel and Syria: Peace and Security on the Golan*. Westview Press. Boulder Co. 1994: 82.

[9] UN Security Council Resolution 497 of December 17, 1981. Shalev: 85.

D. DILEMMAS FACING ISRAEL

Since Israel controls the Golan, it can dictate the terms about how it will be returned, as well as the time frame in which the handover will be completed. Many argue that the core issue for Israel keeping the Golan Heights is purely military, relating to the indispensable strategic buffer zone, early warning and surveillance capacity and the advantageous position the Golan provides for launching an offensive against Syria. This latter capability also provides a good measure of deterrence.

While holding the high ground is still a key military tenet when evaluating terrain, Israel's security rationale for keeping the Golan can be seriously questioned, with former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's readiness to turn over all but 200 meters of the Golan Heights to Syria, during the last round of serious negotiations between each country.

E. DILEMMAS FACING SYRIA

With the death of President Hafiz al-Assad in June of 2000, his successor and son, Bashar, faces the same challenges and internal opposition as his father, when negotiating with Israel over the return of the Golan. After his first year in office he is still developing his power base, and some would argue fighting for his survival. Thus any shift from his father's policy regarding the full return of the Golan Heights would be political suicide.[10]

[10] Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy. *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East*. Brookings Institute Press. Washington D.C. 1997: 93.

F. THESIS

The Israeli myth of keeping the Golan purely for security reasons can be shattered. While the return of the Golan Heights does create new security concerns for the state of Israel, these challenges can be overcome. What prevents the return of the Golan is not purely a bilateral security issue between Israel and Syria but is instead driven by internal domestic politics.

In this thesis I compare the internal politics of a hardline verses a softline approach and the domestic costs and benefits of each tactic, in order to resolve the issue of returning the Golan Heights.

II. SECURITY ISSUES IMPACTING GOLAN NEGOTIATIONS

A. MILITARY: STRATEGIC TERRAIN

The Golan is certainly important to Israel for security reasons. However, further analysis will reveal that the security rationale for keeping the Golan Heights is inflated. Given most Syrian armaments threaten both the Israeli Defense Forces as well as the civilian population, there is a concern among many Israelis that Syria could mount another attack against northern Israel through the Golan. Many Israelis fiercely insist that the Golan is a critical strategic buffer and the intelligence facilities on the slope of Mount Hermon are indispensable, providing extensive visual and electronic intelligence, which produces vital, detailed tactical and strategic early warning data.[11]

Yet, Israel has sufficient intelligence assets to offset the loss of its intelligence facilities on the Golan Heights and should suffer no major loss in warning capabilities by withdrawing from the Golan.[12] Israel has ample ground and airborne intelligence assets available to replace crucial data gathered on the Golan itself.[13]

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[11] Israel places high importance on early warning. With a small standing army of 136,000 Israel nominally requires 24-96 hours to fully mobilize, equip and deploy its 363,000 reserve soldiers to the battle zone.

[12] Gotowicki: 41.

[13] Israel's intelligence assets include the newly developed *Phalcon* Airborne Early Warning aircraft. The *Phalcon* employs a phased-array radar with Moving Target Indictor (MTI) mode capabilities, which allows it to simultaneously track 100 ground, or air targets to a range of 250 miles, (well beyond what would be needed for Golan surveillance). Israel also has MTI capable radars mounted on some of its reconnaissance fighter aircraft, which can provide early warning out to 50 miles. In conjunction with these systems, Israel also has a variety of airborne mounted, long range, electro-optical ELINT (electronic intelligence), SIGINT (signal/communications intelligence), thermal signature, FLIR (forward looking infrared radar, SLAR (side looking airborne radar), remotely piloted vehicle, and balloon aerostat intelligence systems. Source: *Jane's Radar and Electronic Warfare Systems* 2000-2001: 84,204,343,462.

Additionally, 71 percent of Israeli reserve generals think that security arrangements are possible if much of the Golan is returned to Syria.[14] Indeed Israeli military experts widely agree that the Golan has lost much, if not most of its military importance to Israel since 1967.[15] In military terms, Israel does not need peace with Syria;[16] Israel maintains a pronounced military superiority over Syria and the border has been quiet and stable since 1974.

In many Israeli circles the status quo is acceptable. If we evaluate the military balance of powers, the need to keep the Golan for security reasons becomes difficult to rationalize. We must look at two factors when comparing military balance: numbers and potency. The aggregate difference between the Israeli and Syrian militaries is not significantly large.[17] But Israel has the force multiplier of possessing a greater number of ground operating systems that are more potent and advanced. In combat aircraft the Israeli Air Force (IDF) is the regions' most effective fighting force. The IDF commands unquestioned numerical and technological capabilities over Syria. Although Syria can cause substantial damage to Israel, it cannot win a war against it. Syria does have significant armed forces but most experts contend that its military cannot project or sustain its power far beyond its borders.[18] Today, the

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[14] Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:" *The Middle East Journal*, Vol.47, No. 4 Autumn 1993: 625.

[15] Aryeh Shalev. *Israel and Syria: Peace and Security on the Golan*. Westview Press, Boulder CO. 1994:

[16] Stephen H. Gotowicki. *Considering a U.S. Military Force on the Golan*. Edited by Stephen C. Pelletiere. The Peace Process, Phase One. Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks PA 1997:33.

[17] Ibid: 31.

[18] Gotowicki: 33.

Syrian Air Force is basically non-existent and the rest of the military is in poor shape.

It is very difficult to imagine any compelling reasons why Syria would attack Israel if Israel withdrew from the Golan Heights. Syria is no match for Israel in terms of economic development and military prowess.[19] An attack upon Israel from the Golan would carry significant strategic risks for Syria. It would likely precipitate an Israeli military ground response outflanking Syrian forces through Lebanon (the Bekaa Valley) or threatening Damascus through Jordan. In either case, Syria would be hard pressed to effectively respond. The Israeli Air Force would also conduct a punitive air campaign against high-value Syrian targets and cities. Additionally, the Syrians take seriously (as do most of the Arab states), the threat posed by the reputed Israeli nuclear arsenal. Thus a state of peace and economic cooperation is the best security arrangement for Syria.

B. SETTLEMENTS

Israel placed the Golan under military administration, and began to establish settlements in late 1967.[20] It was considered imperative that colonization should begin without delay, with the fundamental objective to anchor the Golan to Israel through agriculture.[21] It had previously been thought that the kibbutzim and moshavim manned by Israelis, would act as defensive field fortifications, which would disrupt guerilla routes. But, as was seen in

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19 Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:" 625.

20 William Wilson Harris. *Taking Root: Israeli Settlements in the West Bank, the Golan and Gaza-Sinai, 1967-1980*. Research Studies Press. Letchworth England, 1980:67.

21 Harris: 62.

the face of massed tank formations in 1973, the idea proved to be a liability.[22]

The 1973 War (6-24 October) interrupted the expansion of settlements in the Golan. In the face of the great Syrian tank assault of 6-8 October 1973, all settlement sites had to be evacuated on the first day of the war. The evacuation of the settlements diverted a significant portion of the Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) military capability. After a successful counter-attack and a return to normalcy, the long-standing strategy that civilian settlements were of military value was brought into question.[23] After the 1973 War some argued that there was a certain illogic in Israeli references to the Golan as a strategic buffer just because it had been occupied and settled. As the 1973 war proved a buffer zone that is settled is no buffer zone.[24]

According to Ze'ev Maoz, Director of the Jaffee Center, the claim that the Golan provides strategic depth that protects Galilee has led to an absurdity:

> we are simply transferring the Galilee to the Golan, and the problem of defending the Golan today will turn into the problem of how to defend the Jewish population of the Golan in few years hence. The settlers would likely inhibit the IDFs strategic response to Syrian aggression.[25]

[22] Ibid: 71.

[23] Harris: 71.

[24] Gotowicki: 26.

[25] Ibid: 26.

Syrian officials also question the logic underlying the security value that the Israelis attach to the settlements. “The Israelis claim that they took the Golan to protect their settlements, but then they built new settlements on the Golan, some only three hundred meters from our territory.”[26]

Most people considered the 1973 war to be a predictable Arab move to regain lost territory and halt Israel’s annexation policies. But because the Israeli leadership viewed the war as continuing proof that most Arabs rejected Israel’s right to exist, the need for buffers afforded by such areas as the Golan was reinforced rather than shaken.[27]

The Israeli leadership remained convinced in its belief that the settlements were the best means of securing defensible borders. While settlement expansion into the Golan continued, there was resistance from some left-wing Cabinet members, in whose view such activity placed an undesirable constraint on Israel’s negotiating position.[28]

The post-war controversy generated frequent press attacks, real unease in the Army and some erosion of public support for the Golan settlements.[29]

Despite Israeli domestic politics over colonization of the Golan, the construction of settlements prevailed because in the government’s view, the settlement system had to be strengthened to establish the military presence in a

[26] Comments by President Hafaz al-Asad to President Jimmy Carter. Muslih: “The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:” 628.

[27] Harris: 71.

[28] Ibid: 72.

[29] Harris: 80.

vital buffer zone.[30] Additionally, the success of the settlers' lobbies, as settlers sought to insert themselves into the public consciousness and into the political system, greatly changed the domestic political realities of the settlement program.[31]

What today amount to forty-two Israeli settlements, which contain 20,000 settlers[32], constitute a significant political problem for the Israeli government and are one factor driving the internal political debate over the return of the Golan Heights.

Many Israelis are adverse to the idea of dismantling Jewish settlements. In any accord, Syria will certainly insist upon their removal. The Syrian demand could lead to a percentage of the 20,000 settlers who are deeply tied to their land to refuse to leave their homes peaceably. This raises the specter of Yamit[33] for the Israeli government.

Others Israelis do not rule out evacuation of some Jewish settlements and then argue that just as there are many Arabs living under Israeli rule, there is no reason to prevent Israelis from living under Arab rule.[34]

Three political obstacles stand in the way of dismantling the settlements on the Golan: the powerful Golan Lobby, the strong opposition by Labor hardliners, and

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[30] Ibid: 82.

[31] Ibid: 96.

[32] The World Factbook,2000, Washington DC: Central Intelligence Agency:www.odci.gov/cia/publications/fact book/index.html.

[33] Yamit was an Israeli settlement in the Sinai that was evacuated by force by the Israeli government, during the withdrawal of the IDF from the Sinai in 1982. The extensive press coverage resulted in significant embarrassment to the Likud-led government.

[34] Muslih. "The Golan: Israel-Syria and Strategic Calculations:" 623.

most of the right wing parties in Israel politics.[35] It is from these groups that top politicians, who take a hardline approach to returning the Golan, gain their greatest support and biggest political payoff.

C. WATER

Water is second only to security in importance to Israel when it comes to the Golan. Approximately 30 percent of Israel's national water supply comes from the Golan.[36]

For Israel, control of the Golan Heights not only bolsters its strategic position but also enhances its control of regional water sources. For instance the headwaters of the Jordan River originate on Mount Hermon. Additionally, the Golan receives a lot of precipitation and has important cachment areas that hold substantial quantities of water, which find their way to the Jordan River, and into Israel's water supply.

Israeli right-wing parties regularly cite the water that comes from the Golan as one of their main reasons for wanting Israel to keep the Heights.[37]

Syrian-Israeli confrontation to manipulate the waters of the Jordan River escalated in the 1960s even before Israel occupied the Golan. The importance of water sources on the Golan bore heavily on Israel's initial policy decision of creeping annexation and Syria's determination to oppose and resist such action, regardless of the price.[38] In 1963-64, Israel proceeded with a plan to divert some of

[35] Ibid: 623.

[36] Kemp: 105.

[37] Julian Ozanne and David Gardner. *Middle East peace would be a mirage without a water deal.* Financial Times. August 8, 1995: 3.

[38] Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:" 620.

the water from the Jordan River to expand agricultural settlement in the Negev Desert.[39] The plan called for the construction of a drainage ditch in a disputed area where a spring was located, supposedly believed to be the source of the Jordan River. Syria threatened to go to war in order to abort this project.[40] The project did result in an escalation of tension, which resulted in a clash.[41]

At the Arab Summit Conference held in Cairo in 1964, a decision was made to divert the tributaries of the Jordan as part of a comprehensive Arab strategy to confront Israel.[42] The resulting conflict, known as the "war over the waters[43]", escalated in the fall of 1964, when Syria commenced work on its diversion scheme to deny Israel water, by attempting to divert the flow of two of the three springs on the Golan that feed the Jordan River. The Syrian project was effectively halted between March 1965 and July 1966, when Israeli jets and tanks in four separate border clashes destroyed the engineering equipment used to construct the canal.[44]

Water remains a key strategic issue in the Middle East, particularly in those exact spots where it is to be

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[39] Shalev: 157.

[40] Itamar Rabinovich. *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*. Princeton University Press, 1998: Rabinovich: 20.

[41] On November 13, 1964, in the northern area of the armistice demarcation, particularly in the Ayn Tall al-Qadi area, the Syrians opened fire at an Israeli military patrol that had encroached upon disputed territory. Israel resorted to air power, and before a cease-fire became effective three Israeli solders had been killed and nine wounded; on the Syrian side, seven people had been killed and twenty-six injured mostly civilian. UN Report, S/6061, November 24, 1964 as quoted in, Muhammad Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations." *The Middle East Journal.* Vol. 47, No. 4: 620.

[42] Shalev: 159 and Rabinovich: 20.

[43] The term "the war over the waters" was used in *The Golan Heights: A Vital Strategic Asset for Israel*, by David Eshel in: *From Rabin To Netanyahu: Israel's Troubled Agenda.* Edited by Efraim Karsh. Frank Cass and Co. Ltd, 1997: 229.

[44] Shalev: 160-161.

found. The fact that the water situation has deteriorated progressively as the countries in the region have faced greater water shortages makes the water dimension of the Israeli-Syrian conflict particularly significant.

Although many observers agree that the control and utilization of the waters emanating from the Golan can be successfully achieved through international management in order to benefit all sides, one point that cannot be minimized is the fact that Israel will need some type of iron-clad guarantees that current water flows will continue, and an equitable distribution of water will have to be agreed upon before it will ever relinquish control of the Golan Heights.[45]

[45] Kemp: 334.

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III. THE GOLAN IN ISRAELI DOMESTIC POLITICS

A. CHALLENGES

It is evident that returning Golan is not simply a bilateral security issue between Israel and Syria, but rather has internal domestic implications, which drives the political decision-making process in each country. The political payoffs and penalties for top politicians to either make concessions over the Golan or to take a hardline approach drives Israeli domestic policy in particular.

Israeli public opinion about the withdrawal from the Golan should be understood within the larger context of the Israeli-Syrian conflict. Both Israel and Syria mistrust each other deeply. Syria believes that between 1948 and 1967, Israel expanded at Syria's expense through ruse, deception, and outright military conquest, while Israelis maintain a deep-seated fear of the potential threat that Syrian ground troops and weapons on the Golan pose to their country's security.

There are three Israeli perspectives regarding the Golan Heights: First there are those who are ambivalent about the extent of a potential withdrawal from the Golan. Second, are those who have adopted and seek to retain the Golan for security reasons. And third are those who advocate a more softline approach endorsing full withdrawal in return for full peace. Peace is Israel's ultimate goal, while total withdrawal to the Israeli-Syrian border of June 4, 1967 is Syria's ultimate goal. Once reconciliation is

reached on these two values, military technicians are likely to be able to finesse the security concerns.[46]

Apart from the more dovish elements in Israeli politics, most Israelis still hesitate to pay the price of peace with Syria[47], which is the full return of the Golan Heights. Thus, a political hardline approach regarding negotiations with Syria over the Golan Heights holds a certain appeal. For those top politicians taking a softline approach, their challenge lies in rallying the required public support for controversial polices (such as returning the Golan), and making the case that there are more risks in maintaining the status quo (with Syria) than in altering it.

B. DOMESTIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A HARDLINE APPROACH

There are those political leaders who believe that Israel needs to retain the Golan.[48] Their assumption is based on the argument that Syria is not ready for peace, and that it cannot be trusted to honor peace because of the nature of its ruling regime and Bathist ideology.[49]

For hardliners, time and space are critical components in calculating the mobilization and deployment of IDF Reserve units necessary to repel any type of Syrian aggression. From their point of view security is territory.

At the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference Prime Minister Shamir was not at all inclined to participate in a peace conference, for both ideological and security reasons. Negotiations between Israel and Syria over the Golan did

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[46] Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready:" 154.

[47] Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:" 625.

[48] Most Likud members and a number of Labor hard-liners fall in to this category.

[49] Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:" 623.

not flourish during Likud's tenure (1988-1992). The first team of Israeli-Syria negotiators to enter into bilateral talks in December of 1991 made no appreciable headway[50] and gave the impression they were in Washington for negotiations when, in effect, both sides had tacitly agreed to mark time together.[51]

The domestic costs of this hardline, no-action approach to the Golan contributed to Shamir losing the election in 1992, when Israeli voters rejected the Lukid Party and chose instead the center-left Labor block led by Yitzhak Rabin[52] (to be described below).

In May of 1996 another hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu was elected as Israeli Premier. His vigorous criticism of Labor and the Peres government, his "peace with security" mandate by the Israeli public and an uncompromising approach towards Syria and the Golan, resulted in a domestic pay-off of winning the election and having Likud returned to power.

The bilateral negotiations which only months earlier (March 1996) seemed tantalizingly close to a final agreement now faced a 180-degree turnabout.[53] The Likud Party's hardline approach had already stalemated the Israeli-Syrian negotiations in 1992, and Netanyahu appeared no less flexible four years later.

Netanyahu started from a hardline position. He reiterated campaign promises to undertake no withdrawal at

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[50] Helena Cobban. *Syria and the Peace: A Good Chance Missed*. Strategic Studies Institute. U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA. 1997: 4.

[51] Pipes: 54.

[52] Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready:" 150.

[53] Cobban: 3.

all from the Golan[54], and vowed that he would not be bound by any of the verbal commitments made by his predecessors.[55]

Israel's new hardline position under the Likud regarding the peace talks was that the negotiations should be resumed "with out prior conditions" and that nothing of a binding nature had been agreed to by the two countries.[56]

The following statement made by Yehuda Wolman, Chairman of the Golan Heights Regional Council, goes a long way to explain the hardline approach taken by top politicians when dealing with the issue of negotiating the return of the Golan:

> I'm sure that any Israeli government that will return the Golan Heights will fall, even if it returns just one settlement.

Today, Ariel Sharon has continued with the Likud Party's hardline approach over the return of the Golan. This only frustrates the Syrians and does little to develop and push forward the peace process. Prior to becoming the Prime Minister, Sharon declared that he would never return the Golan Heights.

The following excerpts from an article written by Ariel Sharon in December of 1999, highlight his views on Syria and the return of the Golan Heights:

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[54] In draft government guidelines drawn up on June 7 1996, Netanyahu reportedly wrote: "The Golan is an area essential to the existence of Israel. The Golan is an important Zionist settlement region of the state that is essential for its security and for the preservation of its water resources. The government will insist on Israel's sovereignty over the Golan in any peace arrangement, and will bolster settlement enterprises on the Golan." Cobban: 30-31.

[55] Cobban: 3

[56] Rabinovich: 4.

> As Israeli and Syrian teams hurry back to Washington to resume negotiations, we are told that Israel must take it or face war. I believe this hasty approach is wrong and, above all misleading.
>
> First, there must be no rewards for the aggressor. In most conflicts negotiated in this century, the aggressor paid by losing territory, as Japan and Germany did after World War II. Syria attacked Israel three times; in 1948, 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973. From 1948 to 1967, it carried on a war of attrition against Israeli civilians by attempting to divert vital water resources from Israel.
>
> Now Israel is asked to reward the aggressor by allowing return of the heights that rise over its territory from the valley below.
>
> Knowledgeable statesman and strategic experts have warned that given the nondemocratic, authoritarian character of the Syria regime and the unpredictability of what might take place in Syria after Hafez al-Asad is no longer in power, an Israeli agreement to return to the 1967 borders could cause Israel to end up with neither peace nor the Golan Heights.

In the first part of his article, Sharon directly condemns the Labor Party’s reckless policy regarding the return of the Golan and the inability to trust the Syrians.

> Second, national defense requires territory. Most foreign defense experts and senior United States Army Officers, who have visited the Golan or studied it, repeat the categorical opinion that even in the missile age it is impossible to defend Israel effectively against a ground attack without military control of the Golan Heights. The last and only line where an assault by Syria could be stopped runs through the center of the heights.

> Fourth, Israel must have control of its water resources, which are of great long-term importance in an arid region, where there is already shortages. A third of Israel's water flows from the Golan Heights and could be diverted. Israel must continue to have a presence near these waters.

Sharon plays the same hardline tune to the Israeli body politic that the Golan cannot be returned because of security and water issues. While the issues are relevant, they can be successfully negotiated.

> Today Israel is being called upon to make so-called painful compromises. It is asked to give up the Golan, transferring to foreign troops a major building block of its overall capability to defend itself, deter attacks and assure itself of early warning if an attack should occur. It is also asked to bear the painful costs of transferring 18,000 of its own citizens and uprooting 33 communities, deepening already dangerous divisions in Israeli society. All this for what is at best an uncertain nonbelligerency agreement? Thanks, but no thanks.
>
> I believe Israel must keep the Golan Heights. Peace is important for Israel, and we all seek it. But it is no less important for the Syrians. Isn't it about time that they were asked to make some painful concessions.[57]

In his conclusion, Sharon attempts to wrap up the status quo in a blanket of peace but fails. Sharon knows as does every Israeli, that peace with Syria means the full return of the Golan Heights.

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[57] Ariel Sharon. "Why Should Israel Reward Syria?" New York Times. December 28, 1999.

Since assuming office, Sharon has toned down his rhetoric and stated that he wants to consider resuming Israeli-Syrian negotiations over the return of the Golan without any preconditions. This is exactly what former Prime Minister Netanyahu said, which to the Syrians simply means negotiations for the sake of negotiations. This amounts to a waste of time.[58] Furthermore Sharon fails to recognize the terms of reference represented by UN resolutions 242 and 338,[59] a precondition for any meaningful dialogue.

It is clear that this hardline stance will not work. For any chance to achieve peace and the benefits it will bring to Israel and the region, a softline approach must be taken.

C. DOMESTIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A SOFTLINE APPROACH

There are those Israelis in the Labor Party and others, who maintain that Israel should seriously consider total withdraw from the Golan in return for a full peace. This softline approach challenges the logic of those who argue that territory is security. Furthermore they realize that Syria will not enter or sign any peace agreement with Israel without a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights.[60] Put another way by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres:

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[58] Editorial by Syrian newspaper, Tishrin web site, Damascus, in Arabic 22 Feb 01. *Paper rules out negotiations with Sharon.* British Broadcasting Service. February 24, 2001.

[59] UNR 242 calls for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from all occupied territories and the recognition of the Israeli state. UNR 338 proclaims that the Golan is sovereign territory of Syria.

[60] Rabinovich: 201.

> There is no Syrian I know who is prepared to be less than an Egyptian,[61] referring to the full return of the Sinai to Egypt in 1982.

The mood between Syrian and Israeli negotiators dramatically changed when Yitzhak Rabin came to office in the summer of 1992, when Syria and Israel started engaging one on one in earnest. Prime Minster Rabin made statements that suggested a deal with Syria was at the core of his foreign policy agenda, and declared that UN Resolution 242 applied to the Golan, and that elements of an Israeli withdrawal would be introduced into the negotiations.[62]

To neutralize the only Arab power that has the ability to pose a threat to Israel's security, Prime Minister Rabin recognized that Israel had to enter into a peace pact with Syria. In order to achieve such an agreement, Israel has to pull out of the Golan. Rabin explored the requirements of accommodating Syria without arousing a domestic backlash, and without compromising security as he understood it.[63]

In 1993-94 Prime Minister Rabin was working to gain popular support for a peace accord with Syria. On 19 April 1994, Rabin told Israel's Parliament in a closed-door session that he accepted a full military withdrawal from the Golan, including the evacuation of all (then) thirty-two Israeli settlements.[64] Under increasing political demands, Rabin committed to holding a national referendum

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[61] Clyde Haberman. *Peres Inches Towards Ceding Golan for Peace With Syria.* New York Times. Section A, Pg. 2, Col. 5. May 26, 1995.

[62] Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready:" 151.

[63] Ibid: 152.

[64] Pipes: 55.

before agreeing to any significant withdrawal of forces from the Golan Heights or to dismantling the settlements there.[65]

Rabin was not above playing politics by talking tough to a domestic audience. Thus one explanation for Rabin acquiescing in holding a referendum was not to appear as a hawk but rather to precipitate a showdown with hardline Jewish settlers, right-wingers and fundamentalists.[66] The referendum was never held but the domestic cost of Rabin's softline approach over the Golan was reflected in an Israeli poll taken in May 1993, according to which 62 per cent of the Israeli public opposed withdrawal from any parts of the Golan.[67] Many contend that this reflects the power of the well-organized Golan lobby that succeeded in playing the security card, which always appeals to mainstream Israelis even though in contrast, 71 per cent of Israeli military officials think that security arrangements were possible if much of the Golan was returned to Syria.[68] Rabin faced additional political penalties from members of his own Labor Party, who organized grassroots campaigns to oppose withdrawal from the Golan[69] and from thousands of demonstrators who marched through Jerusalem and chanted slogans that branded him a traitor.[70]

In April of 1994, Prime Minister Rabin presented U.S. Secretary of State Christopher with a peace package to take

65 Pipes: 55.

66 Mahoud Rimawi. "Jordan swaps notes with Syria between the two summits." *The Mideast Mirror.* Vol. 8, No. 12. January 19, 1994.

67 Muslih. Dateline Damascus: "Asad is Ready:" 152.

68 Ibid: 152.

69 Karin Laub. *Rabin Welcomes Progress With Syria, Cautions Gaps Remain.* Associated Press. May 2, 1995.

70 Bill Hutman. *Protestors call Rabin a Traitor.* The Jerusalem Post. February 24, 1994.

to Damascus. The proposal outlined what Israel would offer the Syrians in return for a formal lasting peace agreement.[71] After reviewing Rabin's proposal, Syria's Foreign Minister Shara publicly called parts of the plan silly and absurd.[72] While the Syrians did not agree to the Rabin proposal, most observers concur that his softline approach did much to promote bilateral negotiations in an effort to end the conflict between the two states.

In an effort to illustrate what returning the Golan Heights would bring Israel, Prime Minister Rabin (during a 1995 radio interview,) praised Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai as a bold move "whose positive fruits we are still enjoying today."[73]

However in November of 1995 Israeli Premier Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. After Rabin's death, Shimon Peres who was Rabin's Foreign Minister became the Israeli Prime Minister. He continued bilateral negotiations with Syria over the Golan Heights and was optimistic that a peace accord could be reached. He continued with a softline approach, predicting that the domestic payoff would be his ability to campaign in the upcoming elections with a Syrian peace accord in his pocket.[74] In early 1996, many observers

[71] The Israeli proposal to Syria at this time consisted of the following actions: Recognize the Syria-Palestine border in place during the Mandatory period (slightly more preferable to Israel than the pre–1967 border), withdraw to this border in three stages over a five to eight year period, with the first stage to last three years and include the transfer of three Druze villages but no Israeli settlements to Syrian control. Dismantle the thirty-two Israeli settlements on the Golan Heights also in stages. In return, Syria was supposed to: demilitarize the Golan Heights and nearby region within Syria, disarm Hizbullah, accept America monitoring of its military, accede to Israeli electronic monitoring and a lookout on Mount Hermon, guarantee that Israel continue, to receive its share of Golan water via the Sea of Galilee and finally, establish full normal diplomatic ties after the first stage of the withdrawal was complete for example an Israeli Embassy in Syria and a Syrian Embassy in Israel.

[72] Pipes: 55.

[73] Haberman. *New York Times*. May 26, 1995.

[74] Cobban: 20 and Rabinovich: 200.

expressed confidence that an agreement on the final text of an Israeli-Syrian peace accord would be reached.

But early March 1996 the Peres government suspended talks with Syria due to several bombings by Palestinian extremists. Immediately thereafter what was taken to be a new hardline approach resulted in the Israeli-Syrian relationship to plunging into a rapid downward spiral.[75] Expressions of optimism quickly changed as political rhetoric was exchanged and the situation developed into an actual confrontation in Lebanon.

In April of 1996, IDF forces launched an extensive air, ground and sea bombing campaign on facilities throughout the southern portion of Lebanon up to, and including, Beirut. The domestic cost of these hardline actions resulted in Labor and Shimon Peres losing the elections in May of 1996.

The three years of neglect (1996-1999) on the Syrian-Israeli track as well as stalling on the Israeli-Palestinian talks provided the catalyst for the election defeat of hardline incumbent Benjamin Netanyahu by Ehud Barak on May 17, 1999. After Netanyahu ruled out any return of the Golan, which was Syria's chief demand, the Israeli public voted and elected a Prime Minister whose conciliatory rhetoric they favored over Netanyahu's hardline approach. Israelis clearly hoped that a softline approach could foster peace between Syria and Israel, thus promoting greater stability in the region.

The immediate political payoff for Ehud Barak's softline approach provoked the following response from

[75] Cobban: 2.

President Hafez al-Assad, who said that the new Israeli Prime Minister was "a strong and honest man"[76], a significant compliment from an Arab leader who could barely bring himself to pronounce the word 'Israel' a few years earlier.

Ironically, it is interesting to note that in the May election, most Golan residents voted for Barak, despite his stated willingness to make 'painful concessions' regarding the return of the Golan Heights to Syria.[77] Additionally, the Third Way party, dedicated to retaining the Golan, was voted out of Parliament entirely, losing its four seats in the 120-member legislature.[78]

While it is difficult to find indirect evidence during the 2001 campaign to indicate if Barak's softline approach regarding the return of the Golan Heights was a factor in his defeat, his position on the Golan was clear before he was elected Prime Minister and during his time in office. The following is his statement to the Knesset on December 13, 1999, regarding the renewal of Israeli-Syrian Negotiations:

[76] Douglas Jehl. *Hope Rises in Syria for Peace With Israel*. New York Times. Section A; Pg 1; Col. 1; Foreign Desk. 5 August 1999.

[77] Sari Bashi. *In Golan Heights, Israeli settlers worried about talks with Syria*. Associated Press, International News. 12 October 1999.

[78] Ibid.

> Mr. Speaker, Members of the Knesset, I do not promise peace without a price. I have never spread illusions; it is not my way! More than two years ago, at a rally marking the thirtieth anniversary of settlements on the Golan Heights, I said the following to the Golan inhabitants, who are truly close to my heart: I tell you honestly what you know very well in your hearts: any government in Israel the concludes a full peace treaty with Syria, as we all hope, will do so at a painful price including a painful withdrawal and a change in the existing borders. However, I tell you that your presence and rootedness here will give every Israeli negotiator additional courage and redoubled vigor to stand firm on every letter and comma, in order to anchor and assure the most vital interests of the state of Israel. I said this to the inhabitants of the Golan back then because I believe a leader must tell the truth boldly. What is more, the Golan residents proved in the most recent elections that they appreciate this.[79]

In the Hebrew edition of the Tel Aviv newspaper *Ha'aretz*, a 500 word commentary by Yosi Werther entitled "Barak's Resurrection: From Political Siege to Political Breakthrough, predicted, "that the resumption of the Syria-Israeli talks will greatly benefit Barak in the domestic arena." Werther went on to note that "it restored the authority he lost in recent weeks" and "the revival of the Syrian track is expected to immediately generate some positive political gains for Barak, if he goes about it the right way."[80]

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[79] Statement to the Knesset by Prime Minister Barak on the Renewal of Israeli-Syria negotiations. Jerusalem, 19 December, 1999. Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site. Foreign Speeches and Statements. http://www.mfa.gov.il.

[80] The Israeli Press comments on Syrian Talks. FBIS Reports of 11 commentaries in major Israeli dailies on 9 December 1999. Document ID: FTS19991209001648.

In a 300 word analysis by Ze've Schiff in the English language internet version of Tel Aviv's newspaper *Ha'aretz*, entitled "Back to the 1923 Border," Schiff comments that the decision to resume talks is a triumph both for Israel and Syria: "The decision to hold a meeting next week in Washington between Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Faruk al-Shara and not al-Asad, should not be seen as an Israeli concession but as part of a breakthrough".[81]

The domestic penalty for Prime Minister Barak and his softline approach towards Syria regarding the return of the Golan came mainly from the Golan settlers themselves, despite the fact that as previously mentioned most voted for him rather than Netanyahu. Those in this group who would be most troublesome would turn out to be the religious fanatics, who viewed the Golan as *'Eretz Israel'* (The Land of Israel). With the support of the Golan Settlers Council these Golan settlers have tried to sway public opinion and have vowed to never leave. They have held demonstrations in the streets, forged political alliances with extreme right-wing groups and have not rejected using violence to demonstrate their opposition and commitment.

Barak meanwhile faced further domestic penalties for his softline approach from his political opponents on the right, who charged that the Prime Minister had acceded to all of Asad's demands. Barak would look bad if he were seen as having given up all the land on the Golan, while Assad remained intransigent on everything else.[82] Another

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81 Ibid.

82 Sarah Honig. *Veracity is not the issue*. The Jerusalem Post. February 29, 2000:pg 2.

stinging setback for Barak for his softline approach towards Syria and the return of the Golan came in March of 2000, when a number of his coalition partners joined the right-wing opposition, to give preliminary approval to a bill aimed at blocking the return of the Golan Heights.[83]

D. CONCLUSION

According to Shimon Peres "to remain on the Golan is to give up on peace."[84] Yet throughout the years polls have indicated that Israelis have been evenly divided over whether to retain the Golan or give it back in exchange for peace.

The Golan is not like the West Bank whose settlers moved there for ideological reasons. While settlers have lived on the Golan Heights for the past 34 years, the Golan has not been engrained in most mainstream Israelis consciousness as part of Israel.

Thus, from a softline perspective, while the domestic costs of the full return of the Golan Heights could lead to violence, the benefits of a full peace and greater regional stability greatly outweigh the sacrifice. While the Israeli body politics is split over the return of the Golan Heights, there is evidence to suggest that when presented with a choice between war and peace in a referendum, a majority of Israelis would support a full withdrawal for a full peace according to Yuval Steinitz, a legislator of the opposition Likud party and an opponent of a withdrawal.[85] And as someone else has noted, when presented with a peace

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[83] Jeffrey Heller. *Opposition Aims To Block Golan Pull Out.* Toronto Star. March 2, 2000.

[84] Haberman. New York Times. May 26, 1995.

[85] Ibid.

pact, the small print won't matter, meaning the Israeli public can be counted upon not to examine the details.[86]

The policy of hardliners on the other hand may be popular at first, and such a platform (as we have seen) can get a person elected to office, but after years of inaction the Israeli public invariably demands a change and elects an official with a mandate for peace.

As Egyptian President Mubarak said of former President Netanyahu: "he wants the peace process to continue according to his personal views and he is only concerned about security of the Israelis and settlers, this is not enough. Ensuring the security of only one side would be a grave thing because security would not be achieved. This matter was understood by Rabin and Peres, but not the new government." Mubarak added: "Peace will never be achieved as long as Israel keeps the occupied territories in the West Bank and the Golan. Netanyahu knows this very well."[87] Indeed at the 1997 summit in Washington D.C., King Hussein of Jordan told Netanyahu that he was destroying the entire peace process.[88]

Furthermore, the international community tends to favor a top politician who takes a softline approach. The evidence for this can be found in the international community's reaction to the election victory of Ehud Barak. Long exasperated by Benjamin Netanyahu's reluctance to engage in true meaningful peace talks, European leaders had the following to say about Barak. President Jacques Chirac

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[86] Gwynne Dyer. *Demanding Deadline for Israeli PM*. The Toronto Star. Edition 1, 3 January 2000.

[87] Mubarak PBS Interview Report. FBIS translated text. Cairo MENA in Arabic. January 7, 1997. FBIS Document ID: FTS19970107000485.

[88] Ibid.

of France, in a dear friend note made public by the Elysee Place told Mr. Barak: Your triumph was a hope for peace.[89]

Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schroder said:

> Your compatriots have placed their trust in you, but beyond your country's borders all the people in the region have great expectations of you at a critical phase in the Middle East peace process, which demands a special measure of courage, decisiveness and initiative.[90]

Great Britain's Tony Blair said the following:

> Mr. Barak is someone I know well and admire hugely. It is a remarkable result which gives him a mandate to move forward with the peace process.[91]

European Union envoy Miguel Moratios traveled to Damascus and emerged saying Syria felt that: Labor can achieve the final peace with Syria.[92]

For top politicians dealing with the return of the Golan, the incentive structure favors a softline approach, as the political payoff is greater both domestically and internationally.

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89 Ian Black. *Arabs greet victor with wary optimism*. The Guardian (London). Foreign Section, page 13. May 19, 1999.

90 Ibid: 13.

91 Ibid: 13.

92 Scott Peterson. "Syria and Israel dust off abandoned peace track." *The Christian Science Monitor*. June 8, 1999.

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IV. THE GOLAN IN SYRIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS

A. CHALLENGES

Most Syrians consider the Golan Heights to be a bilateral security issue because of the strategic vantage point the Golan provides the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Damascus is only thirty-seven miles away from the current Israeli front line, and there are no natural barriers between the frontier and the Syrian capital. Thus, from a geostrategic point of view, the Syrians consider the Golan a critical natural defense against Israel.[93] From a Syrian's perspective, the present situation with the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights poses an unacceptable danger.[94] In terms of terrain, Syrian military planners believe that the Golan plateau in Syrian hands provides a defensive depth that is indispensable for Syria's security, while a Golan controlled by Israel poses a lethal threat to the Syrian heartland.[95]

The reality of the return of the Golan Heights is that this is deeply entangled in Syrian domestic politics, just as we saw in Israel.

Few Syrians would question that Israel is the dominant military power in the region, thus for Syria to attack Israel would be disastrous. Despite some claims in the western media, Syria is not a powerful state in the Middle East and the Syrians know it. The regional strategic situation changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc countries. Syria depended heavily on the

[93] Ibid: 626.

[94] Kemp: 22.

[95] Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:" 627.

generous military aid it received from the Soviet Union, which Moscow is no longer willing or able to provide unless cash payment is made. This has caused a decline in Syria's military capability and ended Syria's drive to reach military parity with Israel. Additionally, Syria also lost a perceived measure of deterrence against a possible Israeli attack, given that its close relationship with the Soviet Union was presumed to have deterred Israeli aggression.[96]

Despite reforms and development projects, the Syrian economy is weak. Syria does not have significant oil reserves, yet oil production accounts for much of Syria's export income, and production levels are expected to shrink in the coming years.[97]

Syrian officials believe that Israeli concessions to fully withdraw from the Golan will reap Israel strategic benefits because a peace with Syria will open doors for Israel to the Arab and Islamic worlds.[98] Israel will gain the legitimacy it has always sought, and peace with Syria will pave the way for Israel's integration into a region that has, in the past, rejected it and treated it as an alien entity.[99] An Israeli-Syrian peace will greatly improve the prospects for normal relations between Israel and other Arab countries including Saudi Arabia.[100]

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[96] The Syrians considered the Soviet backing a critical element of their overall strategic posture, even if it only introduced a small degree of uncertainty into Israeli planning.

[97] Gotowicki: 31.

[98] Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready:" 156.

[99] Ibid: 156.

[100] Ibid: 163.

For Israel, peace with Syria is the key to a broader regional peace.

B. DOMESTIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A HARDLINE APPROACH

Syria's government need to maintain its image as the leader in the fight with Israel before the public, but it also must have the constant spectre of a foreign enemy in order to derive public support for its policies.[101] This hardline approach towards Israel has costs and benefits for its political leaders, namely Hafez al-Asad and now his son Bashar. Some experts have concluded that it was important for Hafez al-Asad to maintain a hardline approach towards Israel in order to promote his domestic image as a nationalist Arab leader. The political payoff for this approach is that he could claim to be the one Arab leader who did not submit to Israeli demands.[102]

Hafez al-Asad's rigid approach when dealing with the Israelis over the issue of the Golan was first evident during the signing of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement in Geneva in June 1974. Syria authorized an Egyptian general to sign on its behalf.[103] The message was clear; Syria would only negotiate with Israel indirectly over issues involving the Golan. By taking this uncompromising approach, Asad denied recognition of the Jewish state and minimized direct contact with the Israelis. The domestic benefit he enjoyed from this bargaining style demonstrated to the Arab world that he remained the champion of Arab resistance against the Zionists.

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[101] Benedict F. Fitzgerald. *Syria in Fighting Armies: Antagonists in the Middle East A Combat Assessment*. Edited by Richard A. Gabriel. Greenwood Press Westport CN. 1983: 53.

[102] Shalev: 12.

[103] Rabinovich: 28.

Prior to 1991, Syria consistently had the toughest policy of Israel's four neighbors, defined by the series of no's: no talks before withdrawal (from the Golan), no direct negotiations with Israel, no partial solutions, no separate deal for the Golan Heights, and no formal peace treaty.[104] As far as Syria was concerned the Golan is Syrian territory, occupied and settled by Israel since June 1967. The terms of peace for Syria with Israel are thus the complete return of the Golan.[105] The two principles defining this policy are land before peace and total peace for total withdrawal.

After Ehud Barak was elected Prime Minister the window opened to reengage on the critical Syria-Israel peace talks. There seemed to be a new confluence of mutual interest in a Syrian-Israeli peace. President Hafez al-Asad was anxious to end the dispute over the Golan[106] but he did not waver from his hardline stance. As Murhaf Jouejati, an American-educated political analyst in Damascus, commented:

> They are very serious about the Golan, and getting back all the Golan. This is uppermost in Mr. Asad's strategic calculi. It is the principle: Syria is very genuine about making peace, but it is not willing to give Israel a right where it has none.[107]

Bashar al-Asad, like his father, views himself as the champion of Arab interests in the region, supporting Palestinian and other Arab rights. This guiding principle

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104 Daniel Pipes. "Understanding Asad." *Middle East Quarterly.* Vol. 1, No. 4. December 1994: 53.

105 Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria, and Strategic Calculations:" 611.

106 President Asad was Defense Minister when the Golan was lost and therefore many say that he considers a solution for the return of the Golan a personal matter.

107 Scott Peterson. "Syria and Israel dust off abandoned peace track." *Christian Science Monitor.* June 8, 1999.

of Syria's foreign policy usually results in hardline rhetoric towards Israel. The challenge for Bashar al-Asad is to convince the Syrian people that making peace with Israel will result in the full return of all the Golan.

While this softline approach could produce favorable results, Asad (while making the final decision in domestic and foreign policy matters) is constrained by his country's conflict with Israel, because the Syrian public will never accept conceding any part of the Golan to Israel.[108] Syrians believe that the Golan has been Syrian territory from time immortal, and it would be political suicide for any Syrian leader to yield to anything less than a full withdrawal from the territory.[109] This firm, principled Syrian stand has continued under President Bashar al-Asad.[110]

Some analysts view Bashar al-Asad as more hardline than his father the late President Hafez al-Asad regarding the return of the Golan. This is debatable but certainly he has not added or omitted anything from what his father demanded, namely a total Israeli withdrawal up to the June 4th, 1967 borders. What Bashar al-Asad is promoting more aggressively is his definition of a "Comprehensive Peace," which includes parallel movement on the Syrian/Lebanese and Palestinian tracks before he will sign an agreement over the Golan with Israel.

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108 Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready:" 156 and Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:" 629.

109 Kemp: 93.

110 Editorial: *The Golan Will Definitely Return*. FBIS translated text. Damascus Tishrin (Internet Version in Arabic). December 14, 2000. FBIS Document ID: GMP20001214000109.

In his inaugural address, Bashar al-Asad clearly expressed his willingness for peace, but indicated that there is a price:

> The liberation of our territory is at the top of our national priorities and is as important to us as the achievement of a just and comprehensive peace that we have adopted as a strategic choice, but not at the expense of our territory nor at the expense of our sovereignty. Our territory and our sovereignty are a matter of national dignity and no one at all is allowed to compromise any of them. We are very clear in dealing with peace issues, firm in our stands since the beginning of the peace process in Madrid in 1991.
>
> We would like to stress here that we have the urge to reach a state of peace but we are not ready to give up an inch of our territory nor do we accept our sovereignty impinged upon. We would like to achieve peace because it is in our strategic choice and because we would like to restore our beloved Golan.
>
> No matter how long it may take this land will always be ours and will be returned complete to us one day sooner or later. We are not prepared to pay the price of the helplessness of the Israeli governments and their ability to make decisions that push the peace process forward at the expense of our sovereignty and dignity.[111]

C. DOMESTIC COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A SOFTLINE APPROACH

After the Persian Gulf War, Syria accepted a joint Russian-American invitation to join Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. Syrian acceptance instantly negated two of the no's (no talk before withdrawal, no direct negations with Israel) already mentioned previously. Talks between

[111] Inaugural address: Bashar al-Asad. Source and translation: Syrian Arab News Agency. Arab Gateway: http://www.al-bab.com.

Damascus and Jerusalem began at the Madrid Peace Conference in October of 1991. Between February and August 1993, Asad implicitly stopped insisting on three more of his traditional no's: no partial solutions, no separate deal, and no peace treaty.[112]

After years of conflict the Syrian leadership reached a strategic decision to make peace with Israel.[113] President Asad made the following remarks in 1994:

> Syria seeks a just and comprehensive peace with Israel as a strategic choice that secures Arab rights, ends the Israeli occupation, and enables all peoples in the region to live in peace, security and dignity. In honor we fought; in honor we negotiate; in honor we shall make peace.[114]

Syria is ready for peace and knows that concessions will have to be made to Israel in order to get back the Golan. Hafez al-Asad recognized this fact as does his son and successor Bashar. Peace with Israel is the concession or strategic choice for Syria. Pragmatism is likely to prevail with the Syrians because the alternatives of confrontation or military conflict with Israel are not viable options. Israel maintains a pronounced military superiority over Syria,[115] and Syrian Presidents have understood this. Syria will never reach strategic parity with Israel, a fact long accepted by the Syrian military.

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112 Pipes: 54-55.

113 Eshel: 233.

114 Gotowicki: 31. Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, Press Conference with President Clinton, Geneva, January 16, 1994.

115 Syria has suffered military defeats to the Israelis in 1948, 1967, 1973 and 1982.

The Syrians are, in fact, afraid that Israel will attack Syria.[116]

Peace with Israel will also promote more economic growth by shifting revenue from the military to job-generating projects in the civilian sector. The Syrian public, whose support for a national buildup is fading,[117] will doubtless welcome a decrease in the number of arms and weapons systems that will not have to be imported. Many Syrians believe that money diverted to civilian purposes will be money gained, while money spent on weapons will be money no longer lost.[118]

In a softline approach, Hafez al-Asad shifted tactics regarding the issue of returning the Golan, by trying to gain support from sympathetic segments of Israel's political spectrum, the Arab population and the Labor Party[119] and stressing the justice of the cause, instead of vilifying the Jewish state.[120] This new strategy may have some useful effect, because the Golan as an issue has not been so ingrained in Israelis that it is part of Israel. Only the small but powerful Golan Settlers Lobby has been trying to convince the mainstream that the Golan is a natural part of Israel.

Syria's current President Bashar al-Asad has said that the door of peace remains open. In a recent interview, he stated that, "he was prepared to resume peace negations with the Jewish state provided it accepted Syria's terms,

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116 Gotowicki: 34.

117 Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready:" 153.

118 Muslih. "Dateline Damascus: Asad is Ready:" 154.

119 Rabinovich: 10.

120 Pipes: 56.

namely total withdrawal from the Golan Heights, up to the June 4, 1967 borders."[121] This gesture to continue dialogue was made after Israel's Prime Minister-elect Arial Sharon won the election from Ehud Barak. While President Asad still holds on to the hardline stance of complete withdrawal, his gesture can be viewed as a softline signal of Syria's desire to engage with Israel in constructive talks over the return of the Golan. More importantly, sectors of Syria's civil society, are timidly but steadily starting to make themselves heard, and they share the regime's position, which wishes to exchange peace for the internal retrocession of the Golan Heights conquered in 1967.[122]

D. CONCLUSION

Syrian leaders have signaled an evolution in Syrian policy towards Israel regarding the return of the Golan from promising outright military confrontation to engaging in diplomacy and negotiations backed by the saber rattling of a capable yet inferior armed force. It is clear that the only viable option for the Syrians to meet their goal for a complete withdrawal and full return of the Golan Heights is a softline approach. This method will certainly facilitate Israel's requirements for acceptance of the Jewish state, will promote mutual security and advance a full-fledged peace with Syria, which is the ultimate goal of the Israelis.

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[121] Interview of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by Abderrahman al-Rashed editor of the pan-Arab daily *Asharq al-Awsat*, as translated and printed in the Mideast Mirror. Syria Section; Vol. 15, No. 28. February 9, 2001.

[122] Gilles Paris and Jean-Pierre Tuquoi. *The New Arab Leaders Show Continuity*. FBIS translated text from Paris Le Monde (Internet Version in French). November 3, 2000. FBIS Document ID GMP20001214000109.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Issa Darwish has said that the Syrian people fully support Bashar Asad, "who is determined to liberate occupied territories and put Syria on the road of economic reforms and development."[123] President Asad knows he cannot succeed with a hardline approach towards Israel. While his public rhetoric towards the Zionist state my be inflammatory at times, it is merely a public relations tool, designed to bolster his image and standing as a strong Arab leader (like his father), and champion of Arab rights in the occupied territories and the region.

Taking a softline approach over the issue of the Golan does not mean giving up or changing the policy established by Hafez al-Asad, of full withdrawal for full peace based on Security Council resolutions and the land for peace formula. In his inaugural address on 17 July, 2000 President Bashar al-Asad can be seen mixing a softline approach while standing firm on Syrian requirements.

He asserted that he is committed to the Mideast peace process and is "in a hurry" to achieve peace but not "at the expense of our land and sovereignty, which are a matter of national dignity, of which it is impossible and not allowed for anybody to surrender or touch."[124]

Indeed any Syrian leader would fall if he conceded a handful of land to Israel.[125] Today, every map in Syria includes the Golan Heights as part of Syria. For Syria,

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123 Susumu Sakata. *Assad's son demands the return of the Golan Heights from Israel*. Japan Economic News Wire, Kyodo News Service. June 18, 2000.

124 Roundup, International News section. *Bashar pledges reforms, stands firm on return of the Golan.* Deutsche-Press-Agentur. July 17, 2000.

125 Hande Ongoren and Safak Altun. *Is There a Turkish-Israeli Partnership against Iran?* [FBIS translated text in Turkish]. Istanbul, 8 June 1996. FBIS Document ID:FTS19960608000022.

the return of the Golan Heights is not a matter of foreign relations, but is a domestic matter because of the impact regaining it in its entirety has on the government.[126]

[126] Ibid.

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V. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

"Israel has no foreign policy; the country has only domestic politics," one US Secretary of State has said.[127] In the final analysis, while the Golan Heights certainly provides a security buffer for the state of Israel, the issue of returning the Golan Heights to Syria is not about security or about foreign policy but very much about difficult domestic politics.[128] For the Israelis, negotiating the return of the Golan has as much to do with pursuing peace as it does with domestic politics.[129] In 1994, Prime Minister Rabin threatened to stop talking with Syria if a group of Labor hawks did not withdraw the "Golan Bill", which required a special parliamentary majority to approve any pullback from the Golan Heights. The maneuver by Rabin to overcome the internal challenge to his authority shows how Israeli domestic politics are becoming the preeminent factor in negotiations with Damascus.[130]

Evidence has shown that from the Israeli and Syrian perspectives it is possible through tough, detailed negotiations to reach a satisfactory agreement over the return of the Golan Heights. From a military point of view, top military leaders agree that the security concerns of each country can be successfully addressed.[131]

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127 Ron Sofia. *The Golan in Exchange for the Premiership*. FBIS translated text in Russian from independent Russian-language newspaper belonging to the Yedi'ot Aharonot group. December 16, 1999. FBIS Document ID:FTS19991219000737.

128 Sarah Honig. *Veracity is not the issue*. The Jerusalem Post. February 29, 2000.

129 Scott Peterson. "Syria and Israel dust off abandon peace track." *Christian Science Monitor*. June 8, 1999.

130 David Makovsky. *Time is running out for a deal with Syria*. The Jerusalem Post. September 30, 1994: 18.

131 Muslih. "The Golan: Israel, Syria and Strategic Calculations:" *The Middle East Journal.* Vol.47, No. 4 Autumn 1993: 625.

For top Israeli politicians, taking a softline approach on dealing with the return of the Golan Heights is not political suicide. The logic for this argument lies in the fact that most Israelis are not tied to the Golan, and when presented with the choice of peace or war in a referendum, the Israeli body politic can be expected to choose peace.[132]

The policy implications for the United States (the power broker in the region), are clear, especially after the terrorist attacks in New York City and Arlington, Virginia on September 11th, 2001. In America's new fight against global terrorism, Syria can be a major contributor in the campaign by co-opting other Islamic countries to join with the United States and take a tougher stance against Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and by ending Syrian sponsorship and support for terrorism. In return for this cooperation, Syria will want economic assistance from the United States and will demand the full return of the Golan Heights from Israel. While it is quite doubtful that Ariel Sharon will acquiesce to Syrian demands, he might find that successful negotiations with Syria over the return of the Golan Heights, combined with American guarantees, can ward off international and domestic pressure to disengage from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

The Syrian track is much less complicated or emotionally charged than the Palestinian one because it is focused on a defined piece of territory. During the decade of on-again, off-again negotiations between the Israelis

[132] Haberman. New York Times. May 26, 1995.

and the Syrians, the gap between both countries goals has been reduced to a narrow strip of land on the northeast shore of Lake Tiberius.

The benefits of peace, as previously highlighted, are especially tangible and significant for Israel: an end to Hezbollah attacks, elimination of the Syrian military threat to Israel, disruption of the evolving reconciliation between Syria and Iraq, the reduction of the prospect of a regional war which Israel would have to fight on multiple fronts, and the weakening of Yasser Arafat's stature, which would give the Israelis a strong edge in negotiations with the Palestinians.

While Bashar al-Asad laces his public and diplomatic conversations with anti-Semitic remarks, the Syrian regime is noted for its fastidious discipline and for its stringent observance of signed agreements; the 1974 *Disengagement of Forces Agreement* is a prime example. Thus Israel would not have to worry about a Ba'thist government ever losing control of 'the street', which is a major concern with Chairman Arafat and the Palestinian Authority.

The American status quo to simply maintain peace and quite in the Middle East is no longer enough after the events of September 11th 2001. The United States should pursue a policy which gently but firmly compels Israel to cede the Golan for their own self-interested reasons (which have already been enumerated above), in consonance with pressing Syria to see that it is in their best interest to recognize Israel and support the United States in the global fight against terrorism. Now more than ever, it is in the United State's national strategic interest to take

the lead to bring Israel and Syria back to the negotiating table over the return of the Golan Heights and in the words of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad: play its full role as an honest broker and a co-sponsor of the peace process.[133]

[133] Inaugural address: Bashar al-Asad. Source and translation: Syrian Arab News Agency. Arab Gateway: http://www.al-bab.com.

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